

THE MOTHER'S CHOICE

By Dora Russell



"Your mother has told you, has she not," he said, "what I wish?"

"She has told me," faltered Alice, and then she stopped.

"I wish you to be my wife, my dear child," continued Col. Osborne, and he still held Alice's hand tightly. "I know I am much older than you, but a man should be older than his wife—and I will try to make you happy."

"You are good, kind," faltered Alice, and she lifted her beautiful eyes to his face, "but I could not feel to you as I ought—I could not—"

"I suppose you mean love me?" said Col. Osborne gravely. "You may not now, of course, you do not now, but I believe it will come."

"But, Col. Osborne—I think you do not understand," continued Alice, gaining courage. "I—I—like—I care for some one else."

"I suppose you mean my nephew George," answered Col. Osborne, yet more gravely; "my dear child, I have heard all about that nonsense; for it is nonsense. George is in no position to marry; he can't keep himself, let alone you. And besides I am much disappointed in him; he is not—"

"Still—"

"My dear child, young people do not understand things

M dear Alice, will you come up to my room for a few minutes, as I wish to speak to you," said Mrs. Maitland in a quiet though determined tone of voice, one morning to her second daughter.

Alice Maitland rose as she spoke, and her fair face slightly flushed. To be asked to go to her mother's room, generally meant something serious to her young daughters, for there they had met due punishment for their juvenile offenses, and the recollections of their visits therefore were not pleasant. But she only hesitated a moment; indeed, she knew she would gain nothing by hesitating longer.

"But the door, my dear," continued Mrs. Maitland, when they reached her room, and as Alice obeyed her, she went on: "My dear, she said, looking at her, "something has occurred this morning that has pleased me much—"

Alice made no answer, but she raised her large eyes to her mother's face.

"This letter," went on Mrs. Maitland, laying a letter which she held in her hand on the table beside her, "is from Col. Osborne, and contains an offer of marriage for you."

Still Alice did not speak, but her lips quivered slightly.

"He says," proceeded Mrs. Maitland, "that he has noticed you for some time, and he has come to the conclusion that you will make him a most excellent wife."

"Mother!" exclaimed Alice, from her parted lips.

"I was prepared for a little surprise," said Mrs. Maitland calmly, "but you see many middle aged men like young maid, and of course in all other respects it is a most excellent match. Col. Osborne is well off, indeed rich, and his house, family connections, everything, in fact, are all that can be desired. My dear Alice, I congratulate you, sincerely congratulate you," and Mrs. Maitland held out her hand, but Alice did not take it.

"But, mother—"

"Well, what, my dear?"

"I—I could never feel towards Col. Osborne what a wife ought to feel—I—could never care for him."

"All that will come, my child; for many things help to make a happy marriage as well as a foolish feeling of love. Money does, for one thing, and he has that, and besides you ought to consider your sisters."

"But, mother, there is something else," went on Alice almost passionately. "I—I—care for some one else—I care for George Osborne."

"My dear, George Osborne, happily for himself and every one else, is quite out of the way. He is about to sail for Australia."

"Australia!" echoed Alice, with a sort of cry.

"Yes, so that stupid little affair is over, and now let us talk sensibly. Col. Osborne is coming this afternoon, and I want you to put on your new blue muslin, and make yourself look up to you as you can for the lover—for men think so much of looks."

Alice made no answer; she clasped her hands together; a thought had rushed into her mind, and she was speaking in faltering accents.

"When is he coming?" she asked in faltering accents.

Mrs. Maitland looked at her watch.

"Why, my dear," she said sharply; "he'll be here directly; rush away and exchange your dress, and bathe your face, and get your prettiest manners all ready. I'll see him first, and then I'll call you down."

So Alice went away, and presently while she was changing her dress, she heard the house door bell ring, and she hit her lips, and a determined look came into her eyes as she did so. But quite a quarter of an hour passed before her mother called her down to the drawing room. Then, when she heard her mother's voice, she proceeded slowly downstairs and entered the room, her little friend, as she did so, her mother, who was standing by the window, turned round.

"Well, Alice, my dear," she said, addressing her daughter with a smile, "here is Col. Osborne come to see you, and I think," she added eagerly, "I had better now go and look after my household duties, and leave you two to have a little chat."

Alice did not speak; she opened her lips, but no sound came forth, and the next moment a tall, gray haired man, who was sitting in an easy chair by the fire, rose and came forward towards her, and took her hand in his own.

"Well, my dear," he said, "and how are you?"

Still Alice did not speak, then with a little friendly nod Mrs. Maitland left the room, and as she did so, Col. Osborne again addressed Alice.



rightly; they see the outward semblance, not the inner man. George is well to look at, but there are many things to consider, as well as looks."

"But if—"

"You mean if you like a person you can forgive faults? So you can—but George's faults are not the mere boyish escapades that most young fellows indulge in. I have looked deeper; George has a profound respect for one person—but that person is himself."

"O, Col. Osborne!"

"Little things tell a man's character to an observant mind. I have watched George. He likes to seem what he is not; he colors up his virtues, and throws his faults into the shade."

"But he always seems so kind!"

"My dear, you are a pretty young girl, who, he believes, admires his young lordship amazingly. But have you ever seen or heard of him making a small self-sacrifice? No, George likes one person immensely—but that person is George Osborne."

"I think you are hard; that you are unjust to him."

"I may be hard, but believe me, I am not unjust. I do not look always on the surface. Outwardly George makes a good show."

"Then you think he has no good qualities?"

"I do not say that—but they are all overshadowed, to my mind, by one great fault—a profound, overconscientiousness of self."

"Well, I do not agree with you."

"I disagree not, but will you try him? Will you write to him and tell him that you have seen me and that I told you that if you married him I would cut him off without a penny? Say you are ready to run the risk if he is. Will you do this?"

"Yes, Col. Osborne, I will."

"Well, then, do it today. My little girl, I'll not cheat you about this, and I believe you, too, will act honestly."

"Col. Osborne, I will let you see my letter and his answer. If he disappoints me—"

"If he does not I have been mistaken in him."

"Then let me write my letter now."

"Well, will you write it here or upstairs. If you'll write it here, I'll sit down and read till you are finished."

"Very well."

Alice rose and went to her small desk, and then with trembling hands began her letter to her lover.

"Dear George," she wrote, "your uncle has been here, and he has told me that if we marry, he will cut you off

without a penny. Dear George, are you willing to run the risk? I am, but it is for you to decide. I think money is nothing to what we would have without it, but then you may not think this, and I do not wish to influence you. But will you write a few lines to me when you get this, as I am naturally anxious, and believe me always, yours truly, ALICE MAITLAND."

After she had finished her short letter, she crossed the room and placed it in Col. Osborne's hand without a word, though her lips were trembling and her face flushed.

He read it slowly over; read it twice, and then looked in the girl's face.

"Will you send this," he said, "and if just as it is?"

"Yes," she answered quickly; "have I not said so?"

"Well, then, fasten it up," he answered quietly, "and call one of the servants, and tell her to take it to George, and wait for an answer. And I will wait here till it comes—and then let us talk about something else."

Alice obeyed him, and placed her letter with her trembling hands in an envelope, fastened it down, and then rang the room bell, and when the servant answered it, she put the letter into his hand.

"Take this," she said, "to Mr. George Osborne's room; wait for an answer, and bring it here."

Col. Osborne did not speak until after the letter was gone, then he began talking about something else.

But the girl's quivering lips could scarcely answer him. She clasped her hands together; she looked vaguely on his face, and Col. Osborne's heart was full of pity.

Half an hour passed, a few minutes more, and then the same servant, to whom she had given the letter, rapped at the door and came into the room.

"Mr. George Osborne sent this, please, miss," she said, and placed a letter in Alice's shaking hands.

She grasped it, opened it, and then a little cry escaped her pale lips.

"Well," said Col. Osborne, steadily regarding her. Alice made no answer; again she looked at her letter; then she rose, and without a word placed it in Col. Osborne's hand, who took it, read it through with a half smile, slightly shrugged his shoulders, and then looked in Alice's face.

"Just what I expected," he said calmly.

Still Alice did not speak.

"My dear child," continued Col. Osborne kindly, taking Alice's hand, "does not this letter tell you exactly what George is? He thinks of nothing but himself, or rather he thinks most of himself, and all others are second to that important personage in his estimation."

Again Col. Osborne glanced at the letter in his hand.

"Dear Alice," he reread, "I got your letter, and as the old boy won't listen to reason, well, the only thing



for us is to give our little romance up. You see it is no use talking of marrying nowadays without money. Love is all very well, but love won't buy the necessities of life. It won't pay for dinners, suppers, etc., and we can't do without them. I am sorry for this, but I think it best to write plainly, and I am sure you are sensible enough to think so too. I am thinking of going to Australia, but I should like to see you to say good-bye before I go. But it's no good talking about marrying without money. In fact, it is impossible."

"Hoping to hear from you, yours truly, GEORGE OSBORNE."

"Well," said Col. Osborne, "tell me exactly what you think."

"I think he is contemptible," answered Alice in a low, passionate tone.

"He is selfish, thoroughly selfish, my dear, that is the true explanation of this letter, and indeed, of his whole character. Now tell me what you will write back, and do you wish to see him?"

"I do not wish to see him; the person I wish to see, that I believed in, is dead—no, he never lived."

"Not in the mortal frame of poor George Osborne at least," answered Col. Osborne with a little shrug; "and now will you write your letter?"

Alice turned away and sat down before her little desk. Then she drew out a note sheet and wrote a few plain words.

"I have got your letter, and I do not wish to see you of hear from you again. ALICE MAITLAND."

"That is my answer," she said, placing her short letter in Col. Osborne's hand.

He read it and smiled.

"You will get another letter presently," he said. "George is one of those who ever pursue the unattainable."

"He will get no answer if he writes one."

"Well, then, don't distress yourself about an idle young fellow, who really is not worth waiting a sign on. I want you to go with me and see a poor woman who really is in great trouble. I want you to give her a little money, I have it here ready for you, but a woman can say and do kind things so much easier than a man. This poor woman's husband has been killed in a boiler explosion, and she has four little, fatherless bread eaters. Will you come?"

"If you think it will do any good."

"I am sure it will do good. Come, let us go and help them to have a good dinner."

"You are—so good."

"No, I'm not, but these little bread eaters perhaps are hungry, and we may as well satisfy them when we can. Will you get on your hat?"

Alice went out of the room and got on her hat, and when she returned she found Col. Osborne waiting ready for her, and they went out together. He led her to one



of the worst parts of Oldcastle, and finally knocked at the door of a broken down looking cottage.

"They heard a child crying within, and then a pale faced, sickly looking woman opened the door."

She curtsied when she saw Alice and Col. Osborne, and looked at them inquiringly.

"And—and we must try to help you if we can," answered Alice, still more gently; "I hear you have some little children?"

"Yes, miss. It's a poor place to ask you into, but if you don't mind"

She opened the door of the cottage a little wider as she spoke, and Col. Osborne and Alice entered and looked around. Poverty was written but too plainly there; was written on the bare, discolored walls, on the scant and shabby furniture, on a wasted looking, sickly child, lying on the floor.

"Is this little fellow one of yours?" asked Alice, looking at the child.

"Aye, miss, the youngest. He was a fine child, but now—"

Alice bent down over the child, and a moment later put money into the little thin hand.

"I wonder what that will buy for you?" she said smiling.

The child looked up as if he did not understand, but the mother's eyes had caught sight of the coin.

"O, miss," she said, lifting her weary eyes, "ye don't mean this—ye don't mean to give the poor bairn this?"

"But I do mean it," said Alice softly.

"O, miss, it's no matter to me; I'm an old woman—but 'tis hard to see the bairns."

"But I do mind you," said Alice; "you must take care of yourself for the children's sake. What would they do without you?"

She made no answer to this. She looked at Alice's sweet face; her pale lips trembled.



"If I might ask something?" she said with faltering lips.

"Yes, indeed; ask what you like."

"It is, miss, that after I am gone ye would sometimes look after them. The others are well enough, but Johnny's a poor, weak bairn, and when he has no mother—"

"But he is not going to lose his mother, I hope," answered Alice gently, taking her wasted hand. "Johnny is going to grow up and be a fine, tall boy, and live to help his mother, and be a comfort to you all your life."

The poor woman's heart was too full to speak.

"And—and," said Alice, "will you take this?" and she put, as she spoke, the other money which Col. Osborne had given her into the woman's trembling hand. "No, no, I want no thanks—and sometimes I will come and see you. And perhaps this gentleman—"

They were gone before she could make any reply, and as Col. Osborne and Alice walked up the poor street, Col. Osborne said quietly:

"You are not so badly off, Alice?"

"O, no," she answered with quick emotion.

"At least we can do a little good."

"And I will try to do it," said Alice.

"I thought you would," said Col. Osborne gently.

"Well, he's not had a bad morning's work, my dear, and now I am going to say good-bye."

He shook hands with her, and left her, and Alice half ran home, and when she got there she sat down and thought once more of George Osborne's letter.

Then she reflected proudly: "I am glad he wrote it; glad I have found out what he really is."

And her heart felt lighter; little things came back to her mind, the selfish words and actions which until now she had half forgotten, and George Osborne's real character grew clearer to her sight. It is difficult always to act; sometimes the truth peeps out, however much we try to hide it. Alice was herself, essentially honest, and the purity of her own nature had blinded her to his. But now this seemed changed, and she thought also she would try to do a little good to the poor woman she had seen.

"I will look out for some things for her," she decided; "and—and how kind Col. Osborne is."

She spent a busy hour or so after this. Her small miseries now seemed half forgotten in the great ones she had seen. She remembered how much she had still to be thankful for and how little many others seemed to possess.

"I can always help a little at least," she reflected, and she once or twice also thought of Col. Osborne.

"At all events he is a good man; he is not always thinking of himself," she decided, and she felt he would be pleased to know she was trying to do a little good.

Thus her next two days were busy ones. Her mother made no comments on her occupations; in fact she had received a quiet hint from Col. Osborne not to do so.

"Let the child alone, my dear Mrs. Maitland," he said; "let her have time to see things as they really are."

Thus Alice was not interfered with, and the boiler maker's widow and her poor, sickly child had the benefit of her busy hands. Then when she next saw Col. Osborne he smiled kindly.

"So you have been trying to do a little good, I hear?" he said gently.

"It is little, then, I am afraid," answered Alice, with a blush and downcast eyes.

"Every little helps, you know; and it always seems to me to be such a small, poor life to live only for oneself."

"Yet many do, I think."

"Not many, let us hope. But, at all events, the selfish lose something."

"The love of others; if we give nothing, we don't get much in return."

"I think that is true."

"And now I am going to ask you something—and I don't want you to answer until you have thought over the question seriously."

"But I am half nervous."

"I don't wish to do that; wish you to feel to me—well a little friendship to begin with."

"Yes," answered Alice with a shy smile.

"And then do you think you could get over my gray head?"

Agnes Alice smiled. Then she bent gently forward and softly touched his hair.

"The gray head," she half whispered; "the dear gray head."

THROUGH DEBT. THE STORY OF A CRIME.

THE following story of a terrible crime committed by a Russian officer and his strange sequel appears more like a tale from Alice's dream than a simple statement of an actual happening. As the principal person concerned is still living, let him be called Halkoff. He has just been released from a long term of imprisonment in Sakhalin Island.

Twenty years ago Lieut. Halkoff was one of the smartest officers in St. Petersburg, and by far the most popular. Every house in the city was open to him, from the mansions of the wealthy to the palace of the grand duke. Yet, in spite of this, Halkoff was not happy. He was in debt. Debt stared him in the face. For a time he had been able to stave off the peril by borrowing large sums from a money lender. But the day of reckoning must come. The money lender would not remain patient forever. To Halkoff it seemed that only one loophole lay open to him. He must marry—and marry wealthy.

Some weeks later it was whispered among the fashionable that the lieutenant had become engaged to a wealthy widow. Even this event brought little happiness to Halkoff. Day and night he was haunted by a terrible fear lest the money lender should demand payment and thus bring down his ruin before the marriage took place.

One morning, the third after his engagement had been announced in the newspapers, Halkoff received a letter. A glance at the envelope told him from whom it came. He tore it open, reading the curt contents with feverish haste. What did it mean? Why did the money lender congratulate him, and then, in words full of meaning, add that he had prepared a great surprise for his client's wedding day? To Halkoff it sounded as a threat. There was a fiendish satire in the lines.

His wedding day! The thought drove him mad. He snatched his sword from the table, and half running, burst into the money lender's office. The Shylock smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Then an ungenerous fury came over the lieutenant. He drew his sword and lashed blindly at the bent figure of the old usurer.

Then he fled from the office, leaving the old man dead! In a drawer in the money lender's office was found a letter addressed to Lieut. Halkoff. When opened it revealed the "surprise" that the old man had intended for his client's wedding. It was not a demand for instant payment, but a full acquittal of every penny that Halkoff owed him. Moreover, when the man's will was opened, it was discovered that he had left all he possessed to the man that had taken his life. For the intended bride was the money lender's orphan.

The feelings of Lieut. Halkoff when these facts were discovered were indescribable. Rage, disappointment, and remorse all found a place in his heart—but it was too late. He had wrecked his life, and a convict prison was all that the future held for him.

LOVE AS DEFINED BY WRITERS. A PAIR OF NEW BOOTS

HAT is love? Asked in all ages, by many eager questioners, this query never has been answered satisfactorily. Like life and death, but even more strange and incomprehensible than these other mysteries, love knows no end, no beginning, cannot be explained in any reasonable, scientific manner. Wherefore thinkers, dreamers, poets, students, have since the world's infancy puzzled and perplexed themselves as to its nature and meaning. Definitions of love have been thick as flowers in a springtime forest, yet have explained nothing. Such definitions, however, continually are increasing, and to compare them is interesting work.

Something, perhaps, may be learned about love by considering the various attributes recognized in it by various students. No two minds, it may be safely admitted, look upon love alike.

Dictionary Idea of Love.

A dictionary definition of love—one is sufficient, since all convey the same idea—says that love is "a feeling of strong attachment induced by that which delights or commands admiration; prominent kindness or devotion to another; affection; tenderness; especially, devoted attachment to, or tender or passionate affection for, one of the opposite sex."

St. Paul long ago declared love the greatest of the three great virtues of which faith and hope form the remainder of the trio. He also expressed his belief in the enduring character of love by declaring that "love never faileth." The wise man, long before St. Paul's day, sang sweetly of love, and was no less firm in his conviction that love is everlasting. "Love," as he expressed it, "is strong as death. . . . Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it; if a man would give all the substance of his life for love, it would be utterly consumed."

Drummond gloriously defined love as "the greatest thing in the world," while Sir John Lubbock, in "The Uses of Life," devotes an entire chapter to love as viewed by the greatest thinkers and lovers of all ages. For love, sport of the cynics, plaything of those who have missed life's sweetest portion, has been deemed worthy of serious, reverent attention by many whom the world holds in highest honor. And justly, since in one form or another it has inspired humanity's noblest deeds.

Potent for Evil or for Good.

The reverse side of the medal is seen in the strange vagaries that bear witness to the mighty, all compelling power of mankind's strongest universal emotion. Love that has passed into the opposite passion is almost as deathly potent for evil as love for good.

"Heaven has no rage," says Congreve, "like love to hate and turn." Shakespeare also, believed that love is eternal, and

THE TALE OF A THEFT.

HERR ZEITLER, fat and pompous, cast his little eyes over the goodly stock of boots, shoes, and slippers that filled his shop. "The best in the city," he informed the world in large, black type upon a showy placard.

Further survey was interrupted by the entrance of a customer. Herr Zeitler saw that he was smartly dressed, and he chuckled to himself. Doubtless the stranger had read the placard, and doubtless it had induced him to test the unequalled merits of the establishment.

"I want a pair of shoes," said the young man.

"Certainly, take a seat," said Herr Zeitler, taking a pair from a shelf.

His customer examined them critically.

"Don't look strong," he observed, slipping his foot into one and lacing it up.

"Strong," echoed the bootmaker, waking enthusiastically. "They are stronger than Samson. . . . Ah, that fits splendidly. Try the other one, sir."

"A trifle tight," he complained, rising and stamping his feet on the floor, "and more than a trifle thin."

"But they are good," Herr Zeitler assured him.

"What are those?" asked the young man, indicating a pair of patent leather shoes at the farther end of the shop.

Always obliging, Herr Zeitler hastened to fetch the shoes. Scarcely was his back turned that the customer rushed to the door, and the little bootmaker had just time to catch a glimpse of the white soles of his unequalled boots as they vanished into the street.

"Stop thief! Stop thief!" cried Herr Zeitler, indignantly, setting off in pursuit. But the thief would not stop.

"Stop him! Stop him! He has—stolen a pair—of my—best shoes," he panted, frantically, purple with heat and lack of breath.

Suddenly, from the stolen boots came a sound of bustling stitches. Herr Zeitler gasped, and gasped again, as he saw the sole from one of his unrivaled boots dangling on the pavement before him. Then, with a flap, it tumbled to the pavement before him. A gurgle of horror escaped the little German. He picked up the piece of leather and hastily smuggled it into his pocket. Had any one seen it? So, his business was gone. A zealous policeman took up the chase. At his Herr Zeitler shook his fist and prayed with all his might that the thief would escape.

The papers that night announced that the police had caught a man escaping with a new pair of boots, from one of which the sole had parted. But search where they would they could not find a single bootmaker who had been robbed of a pair of boots.